

Why Aren't Teachers Using the Resources Companies Sell to Their Districts?

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Key Points

- How districts procure instructional resources often leaves teachers disconnected from what gets purchased, what is actually needed, and what gets used. One way to understand why teachers do or do not adopt certain resources is through Clayton Christensen's "Jobs to Be Done" theory.
- Teachers commit to employing a resource when they perceive that doing so will accomplish one of at least two potential Jobs to Be Done: (1) enhance their current practices to help them engage and challenge students or (2) signal to administrators that they are in line with their school's new initiative. Teachers who expect a resource to fulfill the first of these jobs tend to use the resource more faithfully than do their peers with the latter perspective.
- Vendors need to design their products and supports, and district staff need to consider purchasing decisions, with teachers' Jobs to Be Done in mind.

Instructional resources matter to a school's success. As many teachers will tell you, good resources—such as textbooks, reference materials, computers, and software—are crucial to delivering effective instruction. Teaching without good resources is like trying to build a house without power tools or scaling a mountain without good hiking boots. It isn't impossible. But having the right resources makes a huge difference.

During my time as a middle school math teacher, I experienced firsthand the stress and frustration of resource deprivation. I spent hours of my mornings, afternoons, and weekends scouring Google, educational websites, and various textbooks and workbooks to mash together instructional materials for my class. I had no expertise as a curriculum

and assessment developer, and the hodgepodge I created was a far cry from a cohesive, well-scaffolded, standards-aligned curriculum. But it was the best I could do under the circumstances. The options from my district just didn't meet my needs or those of my students.

It would be nice if my experience could be chalked up to an anomaly. But unfortunately, how districts procure resources often leaves teachers disconnected from what gets purchased, what's needed, and what's used. My experiences and my realization that the problem was systemic led me to graduate school and then to my current work as a senior research fellow at an innovation-focused think tank called the Christensen Institute. My goal in changing my career was to find system-level

solutions to the challenges I faced as a teacher. Yet sadly, as I've scanned the field from this vantage point for the past six years, these problems still loom large and continue to play out in schools and districts across the country. To illustrate, consider a few examples.

Example 1. A state adopts new college- and career-ready standards and undertakes a major effort to help its schools with the transition. As part of that effort, the US Department of Education and partner foundations invest millions of dollars to help districts pay for new curriculum and professional development. Yet three years into the effort, an independent report finds that not much has changed in local schools. Many teachers continue using phased-out textbooks, and their teaching strategies reflect old pedagogical paradigms that don't line up with the new standards.

Example 2. A district's leadership team takes on a new initiative to improve test scores. As part of the initiative, the district invests in supplemental resources for supporting English language learners. To ensure that they choose the best resources for their needs, district leaders convene a committee of teachers and site-based curriculum coaches to vet and then pilot the most promising proposals. At the end of the vetting period, the committee members identify a clear winner and seem excited to roll it out. But a year into adoption, district leaders notice that teachers are turning to Google, Pinterest, and Teachers Pay Teachers for supplemental resources, while the paid-for resources sit idle in classroom closets.

Example 3. An educational technology company wants to ensure its products meet teachers' needs. To that end, it hires a few former teachers to be part of its product development and sales teams. It also makes extensive efforts to solicit feedback from teachers and adjust its products according to their input. But despite these efforts, the company's software is used by just 15 percent of the students who have access paid for by their districts.

Problems like these are not new to education, yet they persist. They frustrate taxpayers who see millions of dollars wasted on unused resources. They frustrate state officials, district leaders, and

foundations that invest in these resources only to see lackluster return on their investment. And they frustrate teachers who feel swamped with resources they don't want and deprived of those they need.

At the Christensen Institute, our mission is to use innovation theories to shed new light on persistent challenges such as these. Recently, we completed a project using a theory and methodology called "Jobs to Be Done" to find out what causes teachers to change how they teach. From this project, we now understand common causes of the disconnects between resource purchases and resource use. In short, teachers often turn down the resources their districts provide because developers and districts often fail to really understand teachers' circumstances and struggles.

What Is the Jobs to Be Done Theory?

Before I get carried away with our findings and their practical implications, it's important to explain the underlying theoretical basis of our research—the Jobs to Be Done theory.¹

Jobs to Be Done is a theory of customer demand. It starts with a simple premise: All people—teachers included—are internally motivated to make changes in their lives that help them progress in their particular life circumstances. When you understand people's life circumstances and the progress they are trying to make, you understand the criteria that drive their decisions.

To find Jobs to Be Done, we start by identifying people who have made recent changes in their lives—for example, teachers who recently switched to new lesson resources. We then interview those people to reveal the causal narratives underlying their decisions. The interview questions are not scripted. Rather, we start by establishing rapport and then asking people to help us shoot the documentary about their adoption experience.

As the interviews proceed, we don't ask people why they like what they chose or why they chose one over another. The rational explanations rarely reveal the true reasons behind their choices. Instead, we aim to capture the events and circumstances that caused their decisions, such as the first fleeting thought that the status quo wasn't cutting it; the twists and turns of struggling with their old options, learning about new alternatives, and confronting

the inevitable anxiety that comes with the uncertainty of change; and when they decide to invest in something new.

Once we complete a set of interviews, we code the events in people's stories and then use cluster analysis to look for similarities across the interviews. As the clusters emerge, they reveal common sets of circumstances people struggle through that shape the decision criteria for their choices. Each cluster of stories connected by similar circumstances constitutes what we call a "job." The theory labels these clusters of circumstances as "jobs" because just as people hire contractors to help them build houses or lawyers to help them build a case, people search for something they can hire to help them when certain circumstances arise in their lives.

It's important to clarify what Jobs to Be Done is not. The term "jobs" does not refer to the roles people occupy in their professions, such as teacher, principal, or school counselor. Additionally, Jobs to Be Done do not represent a person's professional responsibilities. A teacher may find his or her day filled with planning lessons, grading quizzes, taking attendance, or attending staff meetings, but these are responsibilities, not Jobs to Be Done. Lastly, the Jobs to Be Done theory explains the choices people actually make, not the choices they should make. For example, all people should exercise regularly and make healthy eating choices, but manifest behaviors reveal that for many people, "help me live a healthy lifestyle" is not a Job to Be Done.

Understanding people's Jobs to Be Done helps us understand their choices. For example, Harvard professor Clayton Christensen, the founder of the institute, conducted one of the first Jobs to Be Done studies to discover why people purchase milkshakes in the morning. Many morning milkshake customers need something that mitigates hunger, stress, and boredom while driving their car to work. For these people, milkshakes don't just satisfy a sweet tooth. They compete against coffee, bananas, donuts, granola bars, and talk radio to address a host of desires and circumstances that arise during a daily commute. In other words, its circumstances that define a Job to Be Done (being hungry and bored during a commute), not the attributes of the customer (age and gender) or the solution (sweet and thick).

Jobs to Be Done also helps us see the key features of a product or service that will motivate people to bring it into their lives. As another example, Bob Moesta, the leading expert on Jobs to Be Done research and a key collaborator with Clayton Christensen in developing the theory, used Jobs to Be Done to help a Detroit-area home builder market townhomes to empty nesters. The builder had a problem: It offered affordable homes with a host of customizable amenities that attracted many interested customers, but few potential customers signed purchase agreements.

Using a Jobs to Be Done approach, our colleague discovered that motivation to close the contract on a new home only happened once people navigated the emotional process of sorting through all their memory-laden possessions that they couldn't take with them. The key to selling the new townhomes was less about improving their amenities and more about giving people free storage space where they could take time to sort through their belongings. It's people's life circumstances (such as having an old house full of nostalgic knickknacks) and their struggles for progress in those circumstances (downsizing while still keeping important memories) that define their Jobs to Be Done.

What Jobs to Be Done Motivate Teachers?

Teachers also face Jobs to Be Done in their classrooms. These Jobs to Be Done motivate teachers to adopt new resources and change their practices. To discover what some of these Jobs to Be Done might be, I worked with a research team in 2018 to conduct and analyze a set of Jobs to Be Done interviews with public school teachers from across the US about their experiences leading up to the adoption of a new instructional practice.² The patterns that surfaced in these interviews revealed a number of Jobs to Be Done that describe the desires and circumstances often shaping teachers' motivation. Two of those Jobs to Be Done are particularly insightful for explaining why teachers chose to adopt—or not adopt—the resources their districts purchase.

Job A: Helping Find Manageable Ways to Engage and Challenge Students. For many of the teachers we interviewed, there is a Job to Be Done that naturally motivates them to adopt new resources and practices.

We describe this Job to Be Done as “help me find manageable ways to engage and challenge more of my students.” However, just because this Job to Be Done motivates adoption doesn’t mean adoption always happens. Here’s why.

Teachers with this Job to Be Done generally felt comfortable and confident in their abilities as professional educators, but they also knew that in any given school year they would struggle to reach a few students and a few lessons would flop. As they strove to meet their students’ needs, these teachers believed that by broadening their repertoire of teaching strategies and activities, they could better engage more of their students in activities that promote learning. They were continually searching for how to adapt or enhance the curriculum so that more students would feel challenged.

Importantly, however, the teachers we interviewed who experience this Job to Be Done were not interested in new resources or strategies that required them to dramatically change how they taught. If a 20-minute tutorial gave them what they needed to incorporate an attractive new resource or practice into the next day’s lesson, they would give it a shot. But if adoption required 12 hours of training and a complete overhaul of their unit plans, they weren’t interested. This lack of appetite for major change was a rational decision. They had spent years developing their own toolbox of strategies and resources that seemed to work well for them. If a new resource or strategy offered a practical addition to their current repertoire, they bought in. But if it required an extensive overhaul to their tried-and-true methods or went against their intuition about what is best for students, they weren’t interested.

Additionally, the Job to Be Done for these teachers was about not only helping their students but also making teaching more enjoyable and taking pride in their own professional expertise. They were willing to spend time and effort creating or finding new activities and resources because their classrooms were more enjoyable to manage when students were excited to be there. But if the time and effort to adopt something new took them too far outside their normal planning and preparation routines, it wasn’t a practical proposition.

Job B: Helping Teachers Not Fall Behind on a School’s New Initiative. When teachers seem to drag their heels on adopting something new, it’s tempting for school leaders or product developers to just write them off as curmudgeonly laggards who are stuck in their ways. Yet in truth, many of these teachers will be fast adopters of a new resource or practice if it fulfills a relevant, circumstance-based Job to Be Done. The problem of dragging heels happens when these teachers don’t see the new resource as a solution to a Job to Be Done. Instead, the new thing seems like an added layer of unnecessary complexity on top of already demanding work. When this happens, pressure from school leaders creates a new Job to Be Done we call “help me not fall behind on my school’s new initiative.”

For teachers motivated by Job B, adoption happens because non-adoption carries consequences that aren’t worth the cost. For example, one kindergarten teacher we interviewed knew that if she didn’t start using laptops with her class, she would be blamed when her students reached first grade and struggled to use the technology. Other teachers voiced worries that not adopting would mean falling behind their colleagues. Some teachers explained that they didn’t want to run the risk of getting transferred to a new site for not being up with the new program. Others did not want to receive a negative teaching evaluation.

Debunking Common Myths About Adoption

Now that I’ve laid the groundwork of uncovering the Jobs to Be Done that motivate teachers, how can this research help improve the likelihood that the resources a district purchases are actually used? To answer that question, we first need to clear away some of the misconceptions that frequently lead to failed adoption strategies. As I illustrate below, districts and resource developers often fall flat in their efforts to encourage adoption because they don’t see the whole picture of struggles and circumstances that drive adoption.

Mandates Don’t Motivate Use. Job A and Job B described above can both produce adoption in the short term but lead to different outcomes in the

long run. In essence, these two Jobs to Be Done lead to different “hires.”

When analyzing adoption through the lens of Jobs to Be Done theory, we consider two different types of adoption: “big hires” and “little hires.” Big hires are the moments when a person formally commits to a new solution—such as when you pay for a new article of clothing at a store’s checkout aisle. Big hires are easy to track and therefore often get used to measure adoption. In contrast, little hires are the moments when people use the solution they’ve committed to—such as when you take the tags off that new piece of clothing and repeatedly decide to wear it in public. If a solution truly addresses a Job to Be Done, many little hires will follow the big hire.

The important difference between the two teacher Jobs to Be Done described above is that they lead to different hires. Both Jobs to Be Done can get teachers to make the big hire. But Job A (“help me find manageable ways to engage and challenge my students”) leads to many little hires, whereas Job B (“help me not fall behind on my school’s new initiative”) does not. When teachers find that a new resource truly provides them with manageable ways to engage and challenge their students (Job A), they will use that resource repeatedly. They will consistently turn to reliable solutions to this Job to Be Done. On the other hand, when they don’t see a resource as a good solution for Job A but feel pressure not to fall behind in their school’s initiative to use that resource (Job B), few little hires will follow. Their use of the resource only happens as long as the pressure for compliance remains. As soon as school leaders get busy and stop checking for compliance, little hires fade away.

Leaders should avoid using mandates to force resource adoption. Mandates are likely to push teachers into the circumstances of Job B (“help me not fall behind”)

and thus lead to unmotivated adoption merely for adoption’s sake. Instead, allow teachers to opt in when possible and then pay close attention to what they choose to adopt as a signal of the design criteria that will meet their Jobs to Be Done. When opt in isn’t an option, be extra careful to design, select, and implement resources in a way that will align with teachers’ Jobs to Be Done.

Promoting Product Benefits Fails to Address Teachers’ Full Jobs to Be Done. Another reason for the common disconnect between district purchases and classroom use is the shortsighted belief that effective promotion drives adoption: Automakers run ads that paint a life of luxury or adventure from the driver’s seats of their cars; educational technology companies make upbeat YouTube videos showcasing how much students and teachers love their products. Yet these efforts fall flat if they fail to account for the other circumstances that define Jobs to Be Done. In reality, four types of circumstances shape the motivation that comes from Jobs to Be Done, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Promotion, whether from a vendor or through positive word of mouth, generates the *pull of a new idea*. Pull represents the magnetism and allure of a new idea that leads people to envision how it can improve their lives. But pull is only one piece of the puzzle.

Figure 1. Jobs to Be Done Forces of Progress



Source: Author’s design based on concepts from Clayton Christensen and Bob Moesta.

The other force that moves people toward adoption is the *push of the situation*. Push represents the moments of struggle that cause them to want to change—such as when a teacher notices that engagement, achievement, classroom management, or post-graduation success isn’t going as well as expected.

Push and pull describe why a person desires change, but two circumstances opposing change are just as important for understanding the full picture of why change happens with varying degrees of success. First, *habits of the present* keep people invested in the status quo. “I’ve used these lesson plans for years” or “I don’t love this textbook, but at least I know what’s in it” are classic habits of the present. Second, the *anxiety of the new solution* deters people from adopting a new solution. Thoughts such as “Will technical glitches make me lose the attention of my class?” or “What if my students’ parents don’t like this?” reveal some of the real anxieties that hold teachers back from adopting something new.

Together, these four categories of circumstances help us see the big picture regarding what drives adoption. They reveal the elements of context beyond the appeal of a new solution that determine whether someone will bring that solution into his or her life. For teachers to adopt something new, the circumstances that push and pull them toward change must be strong enough to overcome the habits and anxieties that hold them back.

When trying to encourage adoption, leaders should consider how it might influence all four categories of circumstances: pushes, pulls, anxieties, and habits. Sometimes, to effectively encourage adoption, we must eliminate habits and anxieties that hold teachers back. For example, key strategies for alleviating teachers’ anxieties include providing job-embedded professional development and giving teachers leeway to fail forward as they figure out how to make new resources work for them. As another example, leaders can overcome habits by being opportunistic when changes in teaching assignment occur. When teachers move to a new school, grade level, or course, these changes make them more likely to try new resources or practices because the resources and practices that worked in their prior teaching assignment are no longer relevant.

Getting Teacher Input Isn’t the Same as Uncovering a Job to Be Done. Another common pitfall is thinking that soliciting teachers’ input—while either designing resources or going through a resource adoption process—will ensure alignment with their Jobs to Be Done. Countless experts and books suggest we should listen to what people say and build accordingly. Yet the counterintuitive reality is that, without meaning to, people frequently misrepresent what they want because they don’t actually know what they want.

Consider past innovations in the textbook industry.³ During market research interviews, students and their teachers expressed enthusiasm for books that included online links to websites where they could learn more about topics covered at only a cursory level in the books. In response, textbook companies spent several billion dollars creating websites where students could explore topics more deeply. As it turns out, however, few students or teachers ever click on those links. Most students are really just trying to get through the course material, as evidenced by what they do, rather than what they say.

When people are asked for feedback, they often feel a need to give answers they can justify. As a result, they give rational or socially acceptable responses rather than real insights into their actual Jobs to Be Done. Additionally, it’s hard to notice the factors defining your Jobs to Be Done when you are not in the setting that causes you to experience those Jobs to Be Done.

When trying to identify the resources that will fulfill teachers’ Jobs to Be Done, don’t ask teachers what they want. Instead, ask them to tell you the story of the circumstances that shaped their last adoption decision. You can uncover those stories with questions such as “When did you realize that there was a problem you needed to solve?” and “What concerns did you have to work out before you were ready to make a decision and move forward?”

“Evidence Based” and “Standards Aligned” Are Not Jobs to Be Done. One of the most frustrating procurement conundrums happens when high-quality curricula struggle to get uptake while poor-quality curricula get a pass. Foundations and policy-makers have invested heavily in efforts to ensure that schools use standards-aligned and evidence-based resources. But the mantra “if you build it,

they will come” doesn’t seem to hold. The reason is that neither evidence-based nor standards-aligned describe teacher Jobs to Be Done.

It’s not that teachers don’t care about evidence or standards. It’s just that the day-to-day circumstances that define their Jobs to Be Done lead them to prioritize other resources ahead of evidence-based or standards-aligned resources. When a teacher’s Job to Be Done is “help me find manageable ways to engage and challenge my students,” evidence-based resources that are not manageable or engaging don’t make the cut.

When the rubber hits the road, most teachers look for resources that (1) are easy to adopt and (2) students will find engaging.

My teaching experience mentioned above illustrates this point. My district’s official curriculum included a textbook series that was developed through years of research at a major university-based school of education, with millions of dollars in funding from the National Science Foundation and pilot testing with hundreds of teachers and thousands of students across the country. It was a great curriculum, but I hardly ever used it.

For one, it wasn’t manageable. The curriculum came in the form of a few dozen small student and teacher booklets for each unit and a number of other guides, resource books, and manipulatives. It was a nightmare trying to dig through my school’s resource room to find all the hands-on manipulatives, and I never figured out how all the books fit together. Another challenge was that the curriculum was carefully scaffolded, which meant that figuring it out in bits and pieces was impossible.

I suppose that had I been around at initial adoption, I might have received professional development on how to make the curriculum work. But absent that training, I resorted to making most of my lessons from scratch and turning to websites such as Mathalicious.com and Khan Academy for inspiration.

When the rubber hits the road, most teachers look for resources that (1) are easy to adopt and (2) students will find engaging (Job A). Unless a resource

first meets these two criteria, all the evidence and alignment in the world is superfluous.

Designing and Adopting Resources with Jobs to Be Done in Mind

Debunking misconceptions about adoption helps leaders avoid bad adoption strategies, but it doesn’t point them to strategies that will work. If the sections above marked the end of this report, they would land in your life like the frustrating friend or relative who eagerly tells you what’s wrong with your approach but doesn’t actually help you solve your problems. Fortunately, Jobs to Be Done isn’t that friend. The sections below offer examples of how to translate Jobs to Be Done research into practice.

Spend Time in Classrooms to Discover Teachers’ Jobs to Be Done. To effectively uncover Jobs to Be Done, resource developers and district leaders need to observe teachers wrestling through their moments of struggle. Set aside pilot data, focus-group data, and survey data. These data only offer an opaque lens into correlations between resource features and teacher behavior. Instead, spend time watching and listening to teachers.

When observing teachers, don’t look for gaps between how they teach and how you think they *should* teach. Instead, observe the circumstances that motivate their actual choices. What problems are teachers trying to solve? What contextual factors set the parameters for a good solution? Don’t focus on how teachers use products from existing product categories. Instead, look for cobbled-together workarounds and compensating behavior as they struggle with Jobs to Be Done that don’t yet have good solutions.

When you interview teachers, don’t ask them to explain what they like about a particular resource or why they picked a particular product. Instead, ask them about the events and struggles that precipitated their actual decisions. Asking about product preferences will only get you socially acceptable and logically coherent answers. Asking for stories, in contrast, will reveal the circumstances that shape decisions.

Motivate Teachers by Changing Their Circumstances. Those who develop and sell resources have to take teachers' Jobs to Be Done as a given and then design around them. But school system leaders can shape the circumstances of teachers' lives to activate their Jobs to Be Done. They can influence teachers by not only creating pull for new solutions but also generating pushes and addressing habits and anxieties to activate teachers' Jobs to Be Done.

Education leaders can create pushes by arranging experiences that lead teachers to a sense that the status quo isn't working. These experiences might include visiting schools out of the district, attending conferences, visiting students in their homes, or reviewing test score data. These experiences become the precursors to change when they lead teachers to conclude for themselves that students aren't as challenged or engaged as they should be. Administrators must be careful, however, to cultivate these experiences in ways that feel authentic to teachers. If the experiences don't resonate, teachers will feel coerced, and the pushes will activate a compliance-oriented Jobs to Be Done (Job B).

Education leaders can also address habits by being opportunistic with changes in teaching assignments. We found in our interviews that teachers who moved to a new school, course, or grade level were more open to trying new resources and practices. When the resources teachers rely on become less relevant, teachers automatically start looking for new resources to help with their Jobs to Be Done.

Finally, sometimes the biggest barriers to adoption come from anxieties. Despite compelling reasons to abandon the status quo, sometimes the devil you know seems better than the devil you don't know. Teachers know that change is hardly ever easy. Therefore, education leaders need to create systems and supports to make change as smooth as possible and make it safe to work through initial setbacks.

Focus Professional Development on Fulfilling Jobs to Be Done, Not Covering Content. Professional development (PD) inevitably goes hand in hand with successful resource adoption: Resources fail almost inevitably if teachers don't get support on how to adopt and use them. Yet, even with corresponding PD, many resources have poor uptake because the PD still fails to address teachers' Jobs to Be Done. This happens because of how district administrators often frame the problem. They know that teachers need PD, so they ask, "What PD needs to go with this resource?"

The better approach asks, "What experiences do teachers need for this resource to meet their Jobs to Be Done of finding manageable ways to engage and challenge their students (Job A)?" With this lens, it's easy to see that upfront technical training on how to use a resource is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Ongoing, job-embedded support is just as important as upfront training because in-the-moment support is key for making adoption a manageable process. If teachers can't find colleagues or other supports to turn to when they run into hiccups, they'll predictably turn back to the outdated resources that worked for them. Think of this kind of PD as more like robust customer support than like technical training.

Conclusion

In education, money isn't easy to come by, which makes it especially frustrating when districts spend money on resources that go unused. The district staff members who make procurement decisions surely don't intend for their purchases to go to waste, yet this continues to happen. A good sales pitch may get a product through the district office's front door. But only by helping teachers fulfill their Jobs to Be Done can high-quality educational resources make it through the classroom door and into students' hands. Vendors need to design their products and supports, and district staff need to consider purchasing decisions, with teachers' Jobs to Be Done in mind.

About the Author

Thomas Arnett is a senior research fellow in education for the Clayton Christensen Institute. His work focuses on studying innovations that amplify educator capacity, documenting barriers to K-12 innovation, and identifying disruptive innovations in education.

Notes

1. Clayton M. Christensen et al., *Competing Against Luck: The Story of Innovation and Customer Choice* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).
2. For the full report on this research, see Thomas Arnett, Michael B. Horn, and Bob Moesta, “The Teacher’s Quest for Progress: How School Leaders Can Motivate Instructional Innovation,” Clayton Christensen Institute, September 2018, <https://www.christenseninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/JTBD.pdf>.
3. This example comes from Clayton M. Christensen and Michael E. Raynor, *The Innovator’s Solution: Creating and Sustaining Successful Growth* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2003).

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